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Tugs

Recently I crossed the Brooklyn Bridge with a friend. He leaned against the railing and said: "There she goes," pointing at a tug-boat hauling a steamer out of her berth, "she reminds me of an ant lugging a dead cockroach." The simile was apt. I have seen a pair of ants lugging the carcass of a cockroach, and there was the same inveterately purposeful busyness about them that there is about a pair of tugs laboring with an ocean liner, though in this particular case it was a freighter we were watching.

"Here's the transatlantic," he said, with a touch of irritation, "the sailing vessel, the freight steamer, the yacht, the gasoline launch—there's oceans of literature on them and mounds of pictures, but the tug? Why, you can't even *buy* a picture of a tug, not *one*, in New York. About the only time they appear before the public eye is in the movies, and incidentally, at that. Look, there she goes, it's a pretty little craft." I agreed with him in all except his last remark. The tug is not little, is not pretty, and it jars one's sense of the fitness of things to call it "she." It is a he-boat. There is a slipskin something about them that beats words, but that stares one in the face and will bear you out when you say that they are not ladies. They are in their shirt-sleeves all day, tough, dirty and self-possessed, their funnels at a towing obtuse angle to their course. If a liner were to speak, she would tell us of her latest voyage in correct, grammatical English, with a tinge of lady-like preciousness; if a tug were to speak, he would probably pump out, "It's a tough job and no rest, tending harbor," with a certain amount of swearing. If a liner wanted a tooth pulled she would go to the dentist's, if a tug had the toothache, he would go to a blacksmith's forge and feel at home there. Who ever saw a clean tug, or a tug at rest? They use up a four-inch coil of rope in a few weeks' time. As they traffic in and out of the wharves on their important errands, proud-nosed, rolling a relatively huge wave before them, their bows grazing the water, and always on some dirty work—whether mud-scows, box-cars or coal-barges—but pre-occupied beyond it, they give one a sense of restraint and power;

they are the livest craft in any harbor, and their character overtops all other points—it is their beauty. I said they are not little. The sense they give of size is overborne by the sense of compactness, they resemble a loose, rambling steamer that has been rigorously simplified and made sturdier, with all the railings, davits, air-shafts and the fussy intricacy of her decks compressed and the less typical parts eliminated. The steam-lighter, with her exaggerated fore-deck and the two arms of her derrick running stark into the air from almost as far back as her bow, is a cousin to the tug-boat and is even more rigorously simplified.

I asked the superintendent of the J. W. Sullivan firm of tow-boat designers what he thought of their shape, and how it compared with that of other vessels, but he would not commit himself beyond saying that some of his fellow craftsmen thought them superior in design; he thought they showed a certain distinction of line, he said.

There are many who say they have discovered New York, or what amounts to saying it. They have, perhaps. But they are falling into a rut about their discovery, I should think, which for the most part means the Bowery, the skyscraper, the "white way," and a few other things. I remember having seen only one article on tow-boats, and that was written some years ago by a lady who rather strove to be-ribbon them. Who, I ask, wants to see a tow-boat with ribbons? I'd as soon see a lady with side-whiskers.

Tugs are not peculiar to New York, they are the porters in every harbor, but they are typical of New York to an extraordinary degree, for New York is so arranged that a million eyes cannot but look upon them, whether from the height of the office buildings, or the height of the bridges, crossing and re-crossing, or from the ferry-boats, or from the low structures fronting the water; they rub elbows with you constantly; their busy hooting language, hoarse and companionable, is over the city morning, noon and night; near Brooklyn Bridge they are in the ring, in the centre of a tremendously clefted, luminous, sky-scrapered arena, and there, surely, from their high perches thousands of office men and clerks must peer down on them through the day. Yet I rarely hear a tug mentioned.

J. B.